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The Problem of the Capitalist State

NICOS POULANTZAS

In his book *The State in Capitalist Society* (London, 1969), Ralph Miliband presented a systematic and documented account of the nature of class power in bourgeois democracies. In this exchange Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband debate the important questions of method and substance which the book raised for Marxist theory.

Nicos Poulantzas teaches political theory at the Sorbonne and is the author of *Political Power and Social Class* (U.K., 1972).

Ralph Miliband's recently published work, *The State in Capitalist Society*,¹ is in many respects of capital importance. The book is extremely substantial, and cannot decently be summarized in a few pages: I cannot recommend its reading too highly. I will limit myself here to a few critical comments, in the belief that only criticism can advance Marxist theory. For the specificity of this theory compared with other theoretical problematics lies in the extent to which Marxist theory provides itself, in the very act of its foundation, with the means of its own internal criticism. I should state at the outset that my critique will not be 'innocent': having myself written on the question of the State in my book *Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales*,² these comments will derive from epistemological positions presented there which differ from those of Miliband.

First of all, some words on the fundamental merits of Miliband's book. The theory of the State and of political power has, with rare exceptions such as Gramsci, been neglected by Marxist thought. This neglect has a number of different causes, related to different phases of the working-class movement. In Marx

1. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969.

2. Maspero, Paris, 1968.

himself this neglect, more apparent than real, is above all due to the fact that his principal theoretical object was the capitalist mode of production, within which the economy not only holds the role of determinant in the last instance, but also the dominant role—while for example in the feudal mode of production, Marx indicates that if the economy still has the role of determinant in the last instance, it is ideology in its religious form that holds the dominant role. Marx thus concentrated on the economic level of the capitalist mode of production, and did not deal specifically with the other levels of such as the State: he dealt only with these levels through their effects on the economy (for example, in the passages of *Capital* on factory legislation). In Lenin, the reasons are different: involved in direct political practice, he dealt with the question of the State only in essentially polemical works, such as *State and Revolution*, which do not have the theoretical status of certain of his texts such as *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*.

How, by contrast, is the neglect of theoretical study of the State in the Second International, and in the Third International after Lenin, to be explained? Here I would advance, with all necessary precautions, the following thesis: the absence of a study of the State derived from the fact that the dominant conception of these Internationals was a deviation, economism, which is generally accompanied by an absence of revolutionary strategy and objectives—even when it takes a 'leftist' or Luxemburgist form. In effect, economism considers that other levels of social reality, including the State, are simple epiphenomena reducible to the economic 'base'. Thereby a specific study of the State becomes superfluous. Parallel with this, economism considers that every change in the social system happens first of all in the economy and that political action should have the economy as its principal objective. Once again, a specific study of the State is redundant. Thus economism leads either to reformism and trade-unionism, or to forms of 'leftism' such as syndicalism. For, as Lenin showed, the principal objective of revolutionary action is State power and the necessary precondition of any socialist revolution is the destruction of the bourgeois State apparatus.

Economism and the absence of revolutionary strategy are manifest in the Second International. They are less obvious in the Third International, yet in my view what fundamentally determined the theory and practice of 'Stalinist' policy, dominant in

the Comintern probably from 1928, was nevertheless the same economism and absence of a revolutionary strategy. This is true both of the 'leftist' period of the Comintern until 1935, and of the revisionist-reformist period after 1935. This economism determined the absence of a theory of the State in the Third International, and this relation (economism/absence of a theory of the State) is perhaps nowhere more evident than in its analyses of fascism—precisely where the Comintern had most need of such a theory of the State. Considerations of a concrete order both confirm and explain this. Since the principal symptoms of Stalinist politics were located in the relations between the State apparatus and the Communist Party in the USSR, symptoms visible in the famous Stalin Constitution of 1936, it is very comprehensible that study of the State remained a forbidden topic *par excellence*.

It is in this context that Miliband's work helps to overcome a major lacuna. As is always the case when a scientific theory is lacking, bourgeois conceptions of the State and of political power have pre-empted the terrain of political theory, almost unchallenged. Miliband's work is here truly *cathartic*: he methodically attacks these conceptions. Rigorously deploying a formidable mass of empirical material in his examination of the concrete social formations of the USA, England, France, Germany or Japan, he not only radically demolishes bourgeois ideologies of the State, but provides us with a positive knowledge that these ideologies have never been able to produce.

However, the procedure chosen by Miliband—a *direct* reply to bourgeois ideologies by the immediate examination of concrete fact—is also to my mind the source of the faults of his book. Not that I am against the study of the 'concrete': on the contrary, having myself relatively neglected this aspect of the question in my own work (with its somewhat different aim and object), I am only the more conscious of the necessity for concrete analyses. I simply mean that a precondition of any scientific approach to the 'concrete' is to make explicit the epistemological principles of its own treatment of it. Now it is important to note that Miliband nowhere deals with the Marxist theory of the State as such, although it is constantly implicit in his work. He takes it as a sort of 'given' in order to reply to bourgeois ideologies by examining the facts in its light. Here I strongly believe that Miliband is wrong, for the absence of explicit presentation of principles in the order of

exposition of a scientific discourse is not innocuous: above all in a domain like the theory of the State, where a Marxist theory, as we have seen, has yet to be constituted. In effect, one has the impression that this absence often leads Miliband to attack bourgeois ideologies of the State whilst placing himself on their own terrain. Instead of displacing the epistemological terrain and submitting these ideologies to the critique of Marxist science by demonstrating their inadequacy to the real (as Marx does, notably in the *Theories of Surplus-Value*), Miliband appears to omit this first step. Yet the analyses of modern epistemology show that it is never possible simply to oppose 'concrete facts' to concepts, but that these must be attacked by other parallel concepts situated in a different problematic. For it is only by means of these new concepts that the old notions can be confronted with 'concrete reality'.

Let us take a simple example. Attacking the prevailing notion of 'plural élites', whose ideological function is to deny the existence of a ruling class, Miliband's reply, which he supports by 'facts', is that this plurality of élites does not exclude the existence of a ruling class, for it is precisely these élites that constitute this class;³ this is close to Bottomore's response to the question. Now, I maintain that in replying to the adversary in this way, one places oneself on his ground and thereby risks floundering in the swamp of his ideological imagination, thus missing a scientific explanation of the 'facts'. What Miliband avoids is the necessary preliminary of a critique of the ideological notion of élite in the light of the scientific concepts of Marxist theory. Had this critique been made, it would have been evident that the 'concrete reality' concealed by the notion of 'plural élites'—the ruling class, the fractions of this class, the hegemonic class, the governing class, the State apparatus—can only be grasped if the very notion of élite is rejected. For concepts and notions are never innocent, and by employing the notions of the adversary to reply to him, one legitimizes them and permits their persistence. Every notion or concept only has meaning within a whole theoretical problematic that founds it: extracted from this problematic and imported 'uncritically' into Marxism, they have absolutely uncontrollable effects. They always surface when least expected, and constantly risk clouding scientific analysis. In the extreme case, one can be unconsciously and surreptitiously contaminated by the very

3. Miliband, pp. 24 ff. and 47.

epistemological principles of the adversary, that is to say the problematic that founds the concepts which have not been theoretically criticized, believing them simply refuted by the facts. This is more serious: for it is then no longer a question merely of external notions 'imported' into Marxism, but of principles that risk vitiating the use made of Marxist concepts themselves.

Is this the case with Miliband? I do not believe that the consequences of his procedure have gone so far. It nevertheless remains true that, as I see it, Miliband sometimes allows himself to be unduly influenced by the methodological principles of the adversary. How is this manifested? Very briefly, I would say that it is visible in the difficulties that Miliband has in comprehending social classes and the State as objective structures, and their relations as an objective system of regular connections, a structure and a system whose agents, 'men', are in the words of Marx, 'bearers' of it—*träger*. Miliband constantly gives the impression that for him social classes or 'groups' are in some way reducible to inter-personal relations, that the State is reducible to inter-personal relations of the members of the diverse 'groups' that constitute the State apparatus, and finally that the relation between social classes and the State is itself reducible to inter-personal relations of 'individuals' composing social groups and 'individuals' composing the State apparatus.

I have indicated, in an earlier article in *New Left Review*, that this conception seems to me to derive from a problematic of the subject which has had constant repercussions in the history of Marxist thought.⁴ According to this problematic, the agents of a social formation, 'men', are not considered as the 'bearers' of objective instances (as they are for Marx), but as the genetic principle of the levels of the social whole. This is a problematic of social actors, of individuals as the origin of social action: sociological research thus leads finally, not to the study of the objective co-ordinates that determine the distribution of agents into social classes and the contradictions between these classes, but to the search for *finalist* explanations founded on the motivations of conduct of the individual actors. This is notoriously one of the aspects of the problematic both of Weber and of contemporary functionalism. To transpose this problematic of the subject into Marxism is in the end to admit

4. 'Marxist Political Theory in Great Britain', *New Left Review*, No. 43.

the epistemological principles of the adversary and to risk vitiating one's own analyses.

Let us now consider some of the concrete themes of Miliband's book in the light of this preamble.

1. *The false problem of managerialism*

The first problem which Miliband discusses, very correctly, is that of the *ruling class*, by way of reply to the current bourgeois ideologies of *managerialism*. According to these ideologies, the contemporary separation of private ownership and control has transferred economic power from entrepreneurs to managers. The latter have no interest as owners in the strict sense, and hence do not seek profit as their aim—in other words, profit is not a motivation of their conduct, but growth, or development. Since the *ruling class* is here defined by the quest for profit, and this quest no longer characterizes the directors of the economy, the *ruling class* itself no longer exists: we are now confronted with a 'plurality of élites', of which the managers are one. What is Miliband's response to this?⁵ He takes these ideologies literally and turns their own arguments against them: in fact, managers do seek profit as the goal of their actions, for this is how the capitalist system works. Seeking private profit, they also make up part of the *ruling class*, for the contradiction of the capitalist system according to Marx, Miliband tells us, is 'the contradiction between its ever more social character and its enduringly private purpose'.⁶ While not excluding the existence of some managerial goals relatively different from those of owners, Miliband considers managers as one among the distinct economic élites composing the *ruling class*.

I consider this a mistaken way of presenting the problem. To start with, the distinctive criterion for membership of the capitalist class for Marx is in no way a motivation of conduct, that is to say the search for profit as the 'aim of action'. For there may well exist capitalists who are not motivated by profit, just as there are non-capitalists (the petty-bourgeoisie in small-scale production, for instance) who by contrast have just such a motivation. Marx's criterion is the objective place in production and the ownership of the means of production. It should be remembered that even Max Weber had to admit that what defined the capitalist was not 'the lure of gain'. For Marx, profit

5. Miliband, *op. cit.*

6. Miliband, p. 34.

is not a motivation of conduct—even one 'imposed' by the system—it is an objective category that designates a part of realized surplus value. In the same way, the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist system, according to Marx, is not at all a contradiction between its social character and its 'private purpose', but a contradiction between the socialization of productive forces and their private appropriation. Thus the characterization of the existing social system as capitalist in no way depends on the motivations of the conduct of managers. Furthermore: to characterize the class position of managers, one need not refer to the motivations of their conduct, but only to their place in production and their relationship to the ownership of the means of production. Here both Bettleheim and myself have noted that it is necessary to distinguish, in the term 'property' used by Marx, formal legal property, which may not belong to the 'individual' capitalist, and economic property or *real appropriation*, which is the only genuine economic power.⁷ This economic property, which is what matters as far as distribution into classes is concerned, still belongs well and truly to capital. The manager exercises only a functional delegation of it.

From this point of view, the managers as such do not constitute a distinct fraction of the capitalist class. Miliband, basing himself on the non-existent distinction of motivations of conduct, is led to consider the managers a distinct 'economic élite'. By doing so, he not only attributes to them an importance they do not possess, but he is prevented from seeing what is important. For in effect, what matters is not the differences and relations between 'economic élites' based on diverging aims, but something of which Miliband says virtually nothing, the differences and relations between fractions of capital. The problem is not that of a plurality of 'economic élites' but of fractions of the capitalist class. Can a Marxist pass over in silence the existing differences and relations, under imperialism, between comprador monopoly capital, national monopoly capital, non-monopoly capital, industrial capital, or financial capital?

7. Bettleheim, *La Transition vers l'Economie Socialiste*, and Poulantzas, *Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales*, pp. 23 ff.

2. The question of bureaucracy

The next problem that Miliband selects for discussion, again correctly, is that of the relation between the ruling class and the State. Here too Miliband's approach to the question is to provide a direct rebuttal of bourgeois ideologies. These ideologies affirm the *neutrality* of the State, representing the general interest, in relation to the divergent interests of 'civil society'. Some of them (Aron, for example) claim that the capitalist class has never truly governed in capitalist societies, in the sense that its members have rarely participated directly in the government; others claim that the members of the State apparatus, the 'civil servants', are neutral with respect to the interests of social groups. What is the general line of Miliband's response to these ideologies? Here too he is led to take up the reverse position to these ideologies, to turn their argument against them. He does so in two ways. First of all he establishes that the members of the capitalist class have in fact often directly participated in the State apparatus and in the government⁸. Then, having established the relation between members of the State apparatus and the ruling class, he shows (a) that the *social origin* of members of the 'summi' of the State apparatus is that of the ruling class, and (b) that *personal ties* of influence, status, and milieu are established between the members of the ruling class and those of the State apparatus.⁹

I have no intention of contesting the value of Miliband's analyses, which on the contrary appear to me to have a capital *demystifying* importance. Yet however exact in itself, the way chosen by Miliband does not seem to me to be the most significant one. Firstly, because the *direct* participation of members of the capitalist class in the State apparatus and in the government, even where it exists, is not the important side of the matter. The relation between the bourgeois class and the State is an *objective relation*. This means that if the *function* of the State in a determinate social formation and the *interests* of the dominant class in this formation coincide, it is by reason of the system itself: the *direct* participation of members of the ruling class in the State apparatus is not the *cause* but the *effect*, and moreover a chance and contingent one, of this objective coincidence.

8. Miliband, pp. 48-68.

9. Ibid., pp. 69-145, especially 119-45.

In order to establish this coincidence, it would have been necessary to make explicit the role of the State as a specific instance, a regional structure, of the social whole. Miliband, however, seems to reduce the role of the State to the conduct and 'behaviour' of the members of the State apparatus.¹⁰ If Miliband had first established that the State is precisely *the factor of cohesion of a socio formation and the factor of reproduction of the conditions of production of a system that itself determines the domination of one class over the others*, he would have seen clearly that the participation, whether direct or indirect, of this class in government in no way changes things. Indeed in the case of the capitalist State, one can go further: it can be said that the capitalist State best serves the interests of the capitalist class only when the members of this class do not participate directly in the State apparatus, that is to say when the *ruling class is not the politically governing class*. This is the exact meaning of Marx's analyses of nineteenth-century England and Bismarckian Germany, to say nothing of Bonapartism in France. It is also what Miliband himself seems to suggest in his analyses of social-democratic governments.¹¹

We come now to the problem of the members of the State apparatus, that is to say the army, the police, the judiciary and the administrative bureaucracy. Miliband's main line of argument is to try to establish the relation between the conduct of the members of the State apparatus and the interests of the ruling class, by demonstrating either that the social origin of the 'top servants of the State' is that of the ruling class, or that the members of the State apparatus end up united to this class by personal ties.¹² This approach, without being false, remains descriptive. More importantly, I believe that it prevents us from studying the specific problem that the State apparatus presents: *the problem of 'bureaucracy'*. According to Marx, Engels and Lenin, the members of the State apparatus, which it is convenient to call the 'bureaucracy' in the general sense, constitute a specific *socio category*—not a class. This means that, although the members of the State apparatus belong, by their class origin, to different classes, they function according to a specific internal unity. Their class origin—class situation—recedes into the background in relation to that which unifies them—their class position: that is to say, the fact that they belong precisely to the State apparatus and that they have as their *objective function*

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–118. 11. *Ibid.*, pp. 96 ff. 12. *Ibid.*, pp. 319–45.

the actualization of the role of the State. This in its turn means that the bureaucracy, as a specific and relatively 'united' social category, is the 'servant' of the ruling class, not by reason of its class origins, which are divergent, or by reason of its personal relations with the ruling class, but by reason of the fact that its internal unity derives from its actualization of the objective role of the State. The totality of this role itself coincides with the interests of the ruling class.

Important consequences follow for the celebrated problem of the relative autonomy of the State with respect to the ruling class, and thus for the equally celebrated question of the relative autonomy of the bureaucracy as a specific social category, with respect to that class. A long Marxist tradition has considered that the State is only a simple tool or instrument manipulated at will by the ruling class. I do not mean to say that Miliband falls into this trap, which makes it impossible to account for the complex mechanisms of the State in its relation to class struggle. However, if one locates the relationship between the State and the ruling class in the social origin of the members of the State apparatus and their inter-personal relations with the members of this class, so that the bourgeoisie almost physically 'corners' the State apparatus, one cannot account for the relative autonomy of the State with respect to this class. When Marx designated Bonapartism as the 'religion of the bourgeoisie', in other words as characteristic of all forms of the capitalist State, he showed that this State can only truly serve the ruling class in so far as it is relatively autonomous from the diverse fractions of this class, precisely in order to be able to organize the hegemony of the whole of this class. It is not by chance that Miliband finally admits this autonomy only in the extreme case of fascism.¹³ The question posed is whether the situation today has changed in this respect: I do not think so, and will return to this.

3. The branches of the State apparatus

Miliband's approach thus to a certain extent prevents him from following through a rigorous analysis of the State apparatus itself and of the relations between different 'branches' or 'parts' of this apparatus. Miliband securely establishes that the State apparatus is not only constituted by the government, but also

13. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

by special branches such as the army, the police, the judiciary, and the civil administration. Yet what is it that governs the relations between these branches, the respective importance and the relative predominance of these different branches among themselves, for example the relation between parliament and the executive, or the role of the army or of the administration in a particular form of State? Miliband's response seems to be the following:¹⁴ the fact that one of these branches predominates over the others is in some way directly related to the 'exterior' factors noted above. That is to say, it is either the branch whose members are, by their class origin or connections, nearest to the ruling class, or the branch whose predominance over the others is due to its immediate 'economic' role. An example of the latter case would be the present growth of the role of the army, related to the current importance of military expenditure.¹⁵

Here, too, I cannot completely agree with Miliband's interpretation. As I see it, the State apparatus forms an objective system of special 'branches' whose relation presents a specific internal unity and obeys, to a large extent, its own 'logic'. Each particular form of capitalist State is thus characterized by a particular form of relations among its branches, and by the predominance of one or of certain of its branches over the others: liberal State, interventionist State, Bonapartism, military dictatorship or fascism. But each particular form of capitalist State must be referred back, in its unity, to important modifications of the relations of production and to important stages of class struggle: competitive capitalism, imperialism, state capitalism. Only after having established the relation of a form of State as a unity, *that is as a specific form of the system of State apparatus as a whole*, with the 'exterior', can the respective role and the mutual internal relation of the 'branches' of the State apparatus be established. A significant shift in the predominant branch in the State apparatus, or of the relation between these branches, cannot be directly established by the immediate exterior role of this branch, but is determined by the modification of the whole system of the State apparatus and of its form of international unity *as such*: a modification which is itself due to changes in the relations of production and to developments in the class struggle.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 119 ff.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 130 ff.

Let us take as an example the present case of the army in the advanced capitalist countries. I do not think that the 'immediate' facts of the growth of military expenditure and increasing inter-personal ties between industrialists and the military are sufficient to speak of a significant shift of the role of the army in the present State apparatus: besides, in spite of everything, Miliband himself is very reserved in this matter. In order for such a shift to occur, there would have to be an important modification of the form of State as a whole—without this necessarily having to take the form of 'military dictatorship'—a modification which would not be due simply to the growing importance of military expenditure, but to profound modifications of the relations of production and the class struggle, of which the growth of military expenditures is finally only the effect. One could thus establish the relation of the army not simply with the dominant class, but with the totality of social classes—a complex relation that would explain its role by means of a shift in the State as a whole. I believe that there is no more striking evidence of this thesis, in another context, than present developments in Latin America.

4. *The present form of the Capitalist State*

Can we then speak in the present stage of capitalism of a modification of the form of the State? I would answer here in the affirmative, although I do not believe that this modification is necessarily in the direction of a preponderant role of the army. Miliband also seems to give an affirmative reply to the question. How does he situate this present modification of the form of State?¹⁶ If the relation between the State and the ruling class is principally constituted by the 'interpersonal' relations between the members of the State apparatus and those of the ruling class, the only approach that seems open is to argue that these relations are now becoming increasingly intense and rigid, that the two are practically interchangeable. In effect, this is just the approach which Miliband adopts. The argument seems to me, however, merely descriptive. Indeed, it converges with the orthodox communist thesis of State monopoly capitalism, according to which the present form of the State is specified by increasingly close inter-personal relations between the monopolies and the members of the State apparatus, by the 'fusion

16. *Ibid.*, especially pp. 123 ff.

of State and monopolies into a single mechanism'.¹⁷ I have shown elsewhere why and how this thesis, in appearance ultra-leftist, leads in fact to the most rapid revisionism and reformism.¹⁸ In fact, the present modification of the form of State must mainly be sought and studied not in its simple effects, which are besides disputable, but in profound shifts of the articulation of economy and polity. This modification does not seem to me to alter the relative autonomy of the State which at present, as J. M. Vincent has recently noted in connection with Gaullism,¹⁹ only assumes different forms. In brief, the designation of any existent State as the pure and simple agent of big capital seems to me, taken literally, to give rise to many misinterpretations—as much now as in the past.

5. The ideological apparatuses

Finally there is one last problem which seems to me very important, and which will provide me with the occasion to go further than I have done in my own work cited above. I wonder in effect if Miliband and myself have not stopped half-way on one critical question. This is the role of ideology in the functioning of the State apparatus, a question which has become especially topical since the events of May–June 1968 in France. The classic Marxist tradition of the theory of the State is principally concerned to show the repressive role of the State, in the strong sense of organized physical repression. There is only one notable exception. Gramsci, with his problematic of hegemony. Now Miliband very correctly insists in long and excellent analyses (*The process of legitimization*, I, II, pp. 179–264) on the role played by ideology in the functioning of the State and in the process of political domination: which I have tried to do from another point of view in my own work.

I think however that, for different reasons, we have both stopped half-way: which was not the case with Gramsci. That is to say, we have ended by considering that ideology only exists in ideas, customs or morals without seeing that ideology can be embodied, in the strong sense, in institutions: institutions which then, by the very process of institutionalization,

17. See the acts of the colloquy at Choisy-le-Roi on 'State Monopoly Capitalism' in *Economie et Politique*, Special Number.

18. Poulantzas, *op. cit.*, pp. 297 ff.

19. *Les Temps Modernes*, August-September, 1968.

belong to the system of the State whilst depending principally on the ideological level. Following the Marxist tradition, we gave the concept of the State a restricted meaning, considering the principally repressive institutions as forming part of the 'State', and rejecting institutions with a principally ideological role as 'outside of' the State, in a place that Miliband designates as the 'political system', distinguishing it from the State.²⁰

Here is the thesis I would like to propose: the system of the State is composed of several apparatuses or institutions of which certain have a principally repressive role, in the strong sense, and others a principally ideological role. The former constitute the repressive apparatus of the State, that is to say the State apparatus in the classical Marxist sense of the term (government, army, police, tribunals and administration). The latter constitute the ideological apparatuses of the State, such as the Church, the political parties, the unions (with the exception of course, of the revolutionary party or trade union organizations), the schools, the mass media (newspapers, radio, television), and, from a certain point of view, the family. This is so whether they are public or private—the distinction having a purely juridical, that is, largely ideological character, which changes nothing fundamental. This position is in a certain sense that of Gramsci himself, although one he did not sufficiently found and develop.

Why should one speak in the plural of the State ideological apparatuses, whilst speaking in the singular of the State repressive apparatus? Because the State repressive apparatus, the State in the classic Marxist sense of the term, possesses a very rigorous internal unity which directly governs the relation between the diverse branches of the apparatus. Whilst the State ideological apparatuses, by their principal function—ideological inculcation and transmission—possess a greater and more important autonomy: their inter-connections and relations with the State repressive apparatus appear, by relation to the mutual connections of the branches of the State repressive apparatus, vested with a greater independence.

Why should one speak of State ideological apparatuses; why should these apparatuses be considered as composing part of the State? I will mention four principal reasons:

1. If the State is defined as the instance that maintains the cohesion of a social formation and which reproduces the condi-

20. Miliband, pp. 50 ff.

tions of production of a social system by maintaining class domination, it is obvious that the institutions in question—the State ideological apparatuses—fill exactly the same function.

2. The condition of possibility of the existence and functioning of these institutions or ideological apparatuses, under a certain form, is the State repressive apparatus itself. If it is true that their role is principally ideological and that the State repressive apparatus does not in general intervene *directly* in their functioning, it remains no less true that this repressive apparatus is always present behind them, that it defends them and sanctions them, and finally, that their action is determined by the action of the State repressive apparatus itself. The student movement, in France and elsewhere, can testify to this for schools and universities today.

3. Although these ideological apparatuses possess a notable autonomy, among themselves and in relation to the State repressive apparatus, it remains no less true that they belong to the same system as this repressive apparatus. Every important modification of the form of the State has repercussions not only on the mutual relations of the State repressive apparatus, but also on the mutual relations of the State ideological apparatuses and of the relations between these apparatuses and the State repressive apparatus. There is no need to take the extreme case of fascism to prove this thesis: one need only mention the modifications of the role and relations of the Church, the parties, the unions, the schools, the media, the family, both among themselves and with the State repressive apparatus, in the diverse 'normal' forms through which the capitalist State had evolved.

4. Finally, for one last reason: according to Marxist-Leninist theory, a socialist revolution does not signify only a shift in State power, but it must equally 'break', that is to say radically change, the State apparatus. Now, if one includes ideological apparatuses in the concept of the State, it is evident why the classics of Marxism have—if often only in implicit fashion—considered it necessary to apply the thesis of the 'destruction' of the State not only to the State repressive apparatus, but also to the State ideological apparatuses: Church, parties, unions, school, media, family. Certainly, given the autonomy of the State ideological apparatuses, this does not mean that they must all be 'broken' in homologous fashion, that is, *in the same way or at the same time* as the State repressive apparatus, or that any one of them must be. It means that the 'destruction'

of the ideological apparatuses has its precondition in the 'destruction' of the State repressive apparatus which maintains it. Hence the illusory error of a certain contemporary thesis, which considers it possible to pass here and now, to the 'destruction' of the university in capitalist societies, for instance. But it also means that the advent of socialist society cannot be achieved by 'breaking' only the State repressive apparatus whilst maintaining the State ideological apparatuses intact, taking them in hand as they are and merely changing their function.

This question evidently brings us closer to the problem of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of the cultural revolution: but I have the feeling that it takes us farther from Miliband. I do not, however, want to enter here into the problem of the political conclusions of the Miliband's book, in which he shows himself very—too—discreet: the question remains open. I will end by recalling what I said at the beginning: if the tone of this article is critical, this is above all proof of the interest that the absorbing analyses of Miliband's work have aroused in me.

Reply to Nicos Poulantzas

RALPH MILIBAND

Ralph Miliband is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the London School of Economics. Since 1964 he has edited an annual review *The Socialist Register* and is author of *Parliamentary Socialism* (UK, 1962) and *The State in Capitalist Society* (UK, 1969).

I very much welcome Nicos Poulantzas's critique of *The State in Capitalist Society* in the last issue of *New Left Review*: this is exactly the kind of discussion which is most likely to contribute to the elucidation of concepts and issues that are generally agreed on the Left to be of crucial importance for the socialist project, yet which have for a very long time received altogether inadequate attention, or even no attention at all.

While some of Poulantzas's criticisms are, as I shall try to show, unwarranted, my purpose in the following comments is only incidentally to 'defend' the book; my main purpose is rather to take up some general points which arise from his review and which seem to me of particular interest in the investigation of the nature and role of the state in capitalist society. I hope that others may be similarly provoked into entering the discussion.

1. *The problem of method*

The first such point concerns the question of method. Poulantzas suggests that, notwithstanding the book's merits (about which he is more than generous) the analysis which it attempts is vitiated by the absence of a 'problematic' which would adequately situate the concrete data it presents. In effect, Poulantzas taxes me with what C. Wright Mills called 'abstracted empiricism', and with which I myself, as it happens, tax pluralist writers.¹ Poulantzas quite rightly states that 'a precondition of any scientific approach to the "concrete" is to make explicit the epistemological principles of its own treatment of it'; and he then goes on to say that 'Miliband nowhere deals with the Marxist theory of the state as such, although it is constantly implicit in his work' (p. 69). In fact, I quite explicitly give an outline of the Marxist theory of the state² but undoubtedly do so very briefly. One reason for this, quite apart from the fact that I have discussed Marx's theory of the state elsewhere,³ is that, having outlined the Marxist theory of the state, I was concerned to set it against the dominant, democratic-pluralist view and to show the latter's deficiencies in the only way in which this seems to me to be possible, namely in empirical terms. It is perfectly proper for Poulantzas to stress the importance of an appropriate 'problematic' in such an undertaking; and it is probably true that mine is insufficiently elucidated; but since he notes that such a 'problematic' is 'constantly implicit in my work', I doubt that my exposition is quite as vitiated by empiricist deformations as he suggests; i.e. that the required 'problematic' is not absent from the work, and that I am not therefore led 'to attack bourgeois ideologies of the State whilst

1. *The State in Capitalist Society*, p. 172.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 93.

3. 'Marx and the State' in *The Socialist Register*, 1965.

placing [myself] on their own terrain' (p. 69).

Poulantzas gives as an example of this alleged failing the fact that, while I maintain against pluralist writers the view that a plurality of élites does not exclude the existence of a ruling class (and I do in fact entitle one chapter 'Economic Elites and Dominant Class') I fail to provide a critique of the ideological notion of élite and do therefore place myself inside the 'problematic' which I seek to oppose. Here too, however, I doubt whether the comment is justified. I am aware of the degree to which the usage of certain words and concepts is ideologically and politically loaded, and indeed I provide a number of examples of their far from 'innocent' usage;⁴ and I did in fact, for this very reason, hesitate to speak of 'élites'. But I finally decided to do so, firstly because I thought, perhaps mistakenly, that it had by now acquired a sufficiently neutral connotation (incidentally, it may still have a much more ideological ring in its French usage than in its English one); and secondly because it seemed, in its neutral sense, the most convenient word at hand to suggest the basic point that, while there do exist such separate 'élites' inside the dominant class, which Poulantzas describes by the admittedly more neutral but rather weak word 'fractions', they are perfectly compatible with the existence of a dominant class, and are in fact parts of that class. He suggests that the 'concrete reality' concealed by the notion of 'plural élites' can only be grasped 'if the very notion of élite is rejected' (p. 70). I would say myself that the concrete reality can only be grasped if the concept of élite is turned against those who use it for apologetic purposes and shown to require integration into the concept of a dominant or ruling class: i.e. there are concepts of bourgeois social science which can be used for critical as well as for apologetic purposes. The enterprise may often be risky, but is sometimes legitimate and necessary.

However, the general point which Poulantzas raises goes far beyond the use of this or that concept. In fact, it concerns nothing less than the status of empirical enquiry and its relationship to theory. In this regard, I would readily grant that

4. e.g. 'Governments may be solely concerned with the better running of "the economy". But the descriptions of systems as "the economy" is part of the idiom of ideology, and obscures the real process. For what is being improved is a capitalist economy; and this ensures that whoever may or may not gain, capitalist interests are least likely to lose' (op. cit., p. 79. Italics are original).

The State in Capitalist Society may be insufficiently 'theoretical' in the sense in which Poulantzas means it; but I also tend to think that his own approach, as suggested in his review and in his otherwise important book, *Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales*, a translation of which into English is urgently needed, errs in the opposite direction. To put the point plainly, I think it is possible, in this field at least, to be so profoundly concerned with the elaboration of an appropriate 'problematic' and with the avoidance of any contamination with opposed 'problematics', as to lose sight of the absolute necessity of empirical enquiry, and of the empirical demonstration of the falsity of these opposed and apologetic 'problematics'. Poulantzas declares himself not to be against the study of the 'concrete': I would go much further and suggest that, of course on the basis of an appropriate 'problematic', such a study of the concrete is a *sine qua non* of the kind of 'demystifying' enterprise which, he kindly suggests, my book accomplishes. After all, it was none other than Marx who stressed the importance of empirical validation (or invalidation) and who spent many years of his life in precisely such an undertaking; and while I do not suggest for a moment that Poulantzas is unaware of this fact, I do think that he, and the point also goes for Louis Althusser and his collaborators, may tend to give it rather less attention than it deserves. This, I must stress, is not a crude (and false) contraposition of empiricist versus non- or anti-empiricist approaches: it is a matter of emphasis—but the emphasis is important.

2. The objective nature of the State

Poulantzas's critique of my approach also underlies other points of difference between us. But before dealing with these, I should like to take up very briefly what he calls 'the false problem of managerialism'. Managerialism is a false problem in one sense, not in another. It is a false problem in the sense that the 'motivations' of managers (of which more in a moment) are not such as to distinguish the latter in any fundamental way from other members of the capitalist class: i.e. he and I are agreed that the thesis of the 'soulful corporation' is a mystification. But he also suggests that I attribute to the managers 'an importance they do not possess' (p. 72). This seems to me to underestimate the significance of the 'managerial' phenomenon in the

internal organization of capitalist production (which, incidentally, Marx writing a hundred years ago, did not do).⁵ Poulantzas for his own part chooses to stress 'the differences and relations between fractions of capital'. But while these are important and need to be comprehended in an economic and political analysis of contemporary capitalism I would argue myself that the emphasis which he gives to these differences and relations may well obscure the underlying cohesion of these various elements—and may well play into the hands of those who focus on these differences in order to deny the fundamental cohesion of the capitalist class in the conditions of advanced capitalism.

More important, however, Poulantzas also suggests that I attach undue importance, indeed that I am altogether mistaken in attaching any importance to the 'motivations' of the managers. Thus, 'the characterization of the existing social system as capitalist in no way depends on the motivations of the conduct of the managers ... to characterize the class position of managers, one need not refer to the motivations of their conduct, but only to their place in production and their relation to the ownership of the means of production' (p. 71). I think myself that one must refer to both not because managerial 'inmotivations' are in themselves critical (and Poulantzas is mistaken in believing that I think they are)⁶ but precisely in order to show why they are not. By ignoring them altogether, one leaves a dangerous gap in the argument which needs to be put forward against managerialist apologetics. This is why, I take it, Baran and Sweezy, for instance, devote a good deal of attention to 'business behaviour' in their *Monopoly Capital*.

5. In fact, his formulations may go rather further than is warranted: 'A large part of the social capital is employed by people who do not own it and who consequently tackle things quite differently than the owner' (*Capital*, Moscow, 1962, III, p. 431). 'This is the abolition of the capitalist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production itself, and hence a self-dissolving contradiction, which *prima facie* represents a mere phase of transition to a new form of production' (*Ibid.*, p. 429).

6. e.g. 'Like the vulgar owner-entrepreneur of the bad old days, the modern manager, however bright and shiny, must also submit to the imperative demands inherent in the system of which he is both master and servant; and the most important such demand is that he should make the "highest possible" profits. Whatever his motives and aims be, they can only be fulfilled on the basis of his success in this regard.' (*The State in Capitalist Society*, p. 34.)

This issue of 'motivations' also arises, in a much more significant and far-reaching way, in connection with what I have called the state élite and its relation to the ruling class. Poulantzas notes that, in order to rebut the ideologies which affirm the neutrality of the state, I bring forward evidence to show that members of that class are themselves involved in government, and also show the degree to which those who man the command posts of the various parts of the state system are, by social origin, status, milieu (and, he might have added, ideological dispositions) connected with the ruling class. But, he also adds, this procedure, while having a 'capital demystifying importance'⁷ is 'not the most significant one' (p. 72). His reason for saying this is so basic that I must here quote him at some length: 'The relation between the bourgeois class and the State is an *objective relation*. This means that if the function of the State in a determinate social formation and the interests of the dominant class in this formation coincide, it is by reason of the system itself' (p. 73).⁸ Similarly, the members of the state apparatus 'function according to a specific internal unity. Their class origin—class situation—recedes into the background in relation to that which unifies them—their *class position*: that is to say, the fact that they belong precisely to the State apparatus and that they have as their *objective function* the actualization of the role of the State. The totality of this role coincides with the interests of the ruling class' (pp. 73-4).⁹

I should like to make two comments about this. The first and less important is that Poulantzas greatly under-estimates the extent to which I myself do take account of the 'objective relations' which affect and shape the role of the State. In fact, I repeatedly note how government and bureaucracy, irrespective of social origin, class situation and even ideological dispositions, are subject to the structural constraints of the system. Even so, I should perhaps have stressed this aspect of the matter more.

But however that may be, I believe—and this is my second point—that Poulantzas himself is here rather one-sided and that he goes much too far in dismissing the nature of the state élite as of altogether no account. For what his exclusive stress on 'objective relations' suggests is that what the 'state does is in every particular and at all times wholly determined by these 'objective relations'; in other words, that the structural con-

7. Italics in text. 8. Italics in text. 9. Italics in text.

straints of the system are so absolutely compelling as to turn those who run the state into the merest functionaries and executants of policies imposed upon them by 'the system'. At the same time, however, he also rejects the 'long Marxist tradition (which) has considered that the State is only a simple tool or instrument manipulated at will by the ruling class' (p. 74). Instead, he stresses 'the relative autonomy of the state'. But all that this seems to me to do is to substitute the notion of 'objective structures' and 'objective relations' for the notion of 'ruling' class'. But since the ruling class is a dominant element of the system, we are in effect back at the point of total subordination of the state élite to that class; i.e. the state is not 'manipulated' by the ruling class into doing its bidding: it does so autonomously but totally because of the 'objective relations' imposed upon it by the system. Poulantzas condemns the 'economism' of the Second and Third Internationals and attributes to it their neglect of the state (p. 68). But his own analysis seems to me to lead straight towards a kind of structural determinism, or rather a structural super-determinism, which makes impossible a truly realistic consideration of the dialectical relationship between the state and 'the system'.

For my own part, I do believe that 'the state in these class societies is primarily and inevitably the guardian and protector of the economic interests which are dominant in them. Its "real" purpose and mission is to ensure their continued predominance, not to prevent it.'¹⁰ But I also believe that within this 'problematic', the state élite is involved in a far more complex relationship with 'the system' and with society as a whole than Poulantzas's scheme allows; and that at least to a certain but definite and important extent that relationship is shaped by the kind of factors which I bring into the analysis and which Poulantzas dismisses as of no account.

The political danger of structural super-determinism would seem to me to be obvious. For if the state élite is as totally imprisoned in objective structures as is suggested, it follows that there is really no difference between a state ruled, say, by bourgeois constitutionalists, whether conservative or social-democrat, and one ruled by, say, Fascists. It was the same approach which led the Comintern in its 'class against class' period fatally to under-estimate what the victory of the Nazis would mean for the German working-class movement. This is an ultra-left devia-

10. *The State in Capitalist Society*, p. 265.

tion which is also not uncommon today; and it is the obverse of a right deviation which assumes that changes in government, for instance the election of a social-democratic government, accompanied by some changes in the personnel of the state system, are sufficient to impart an entirely new character to the nature and role of the state. Both are deviations, and both are dangerous.

It is the same sort of obliteration of differences in the forms of government and state which appears in Poulantzas's references to the 'relative autonomy' of the state. He suggests that Marx designated Bonapartism as the 'religion of the bourgeoisie', and takes Marx to mean that Bonapartism was 'characteristic of all forms of the capitalist state' (p. 74).¹¹ I stand to be corrected but I know of no work of Marx which admits of such an interpretation; and if he had said anything which did admit of such an interpretation, he would have been utterly mistaken. For in any meaningful sense of the concept, Bonapartism has not been characteristic of all forms of the capitalist state—rather the reverse. What Marx did say was that Bonapartism in France 'was the only form of government possible at the time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation'.¹² It is perfectly true that all states are in some degree 'autonomous', and Poulantzas misreads me when he suggests that I 'finally admit this autonomy only in the extreme case of Fascism' (p. 74).¹³ What I do say is that Fascism is the extreme case of the state's autonomy in the context of capitalist society, which is not at all the same thing—and that between the kind of autonomy which is achieved by the state under Fascism, and that which is achieved by it under the conditions of

11. Italics in text.

12. 'The Civil War in France', in *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1950), Vol. 1, p. 469.

13. It is, incidentally, this recognition on my part of the 'relative autonomy' of the state which leads me, *inter alia*, to suggest that Poulantzas also misreads me when he states that my analysis 'converges with the orthodox communist thesis of State monopoly capitalism, according to which the present form of the State is specified by increasingly close inter-personal relations between the monopolies and the members of the State apparatus, by the "fusion of State and monopolies into a single mechanism"' (p. 71). In fact, I think this scheme to be simplistic and explicitly question its usefulness (*The State in Capitalist Society*, p. 11, n. 2).

bourgeois democracy, there is a large gulf, which it is dangerous to underestimate. This scarcely leads me to an apotheosis of bourgeois democracy. It leads me rather to say that 'the point of the socialist critique of "bourgeois freedoms" is not (or should not be) that they are of no consequence, but they are profoundly inadequate, and need to be extended by the radical transformation of the context, economic, social and political, which condemns them to inadequacy and erosion.'¹⁴

3. *The ideological institutions*

Poulantzas's references to the sections of my book devoted to ideology also raise points of great substance. He suggests that both he and I 'have ended by considering that ideology only exists in ideas, customs and morals without seeing that ideology can be embodied, in the strong sense, in institutions' (p. 76).¹⁵ I myself must plead not guilty to the charge. What he, again most generously, calls my 'long and excellent analyses' of the subject largely focus precisely on the institutions which are the purveyors of ideology, and on the degree to which they are part and parcel, as institutions, of the general system of domination—and I do this in relation to parties, churches, pressure groups, the mass media, education, and so on. What value my analyses may have lies, I think, in my attempted demonstration of the fact that 'political socialization' is a process performed by institutions, many of which never cease to insist on their 'un-ideological', 'un-political' and 'neutral' character.

The much more important point is that Poulantzas suggests that these institutions 'belong to the system of the State' and he proposes the thesis that this system of the state 'is composed of several *apparatuses* or *institutions* of which certain have a principally repressive role, and others a principally ideological role', and among these he lists the Church, political parties, unions, the schools, the mass media and, from a certain point of view, the family (p. 77).¹⁶

I am extremely dubious about this. I suggest in *The State in Capitalist Society* that the state is increasingly involved in the process of 'political socialization' and that it plays, in certain respects, an extremely important role in it.¹⁷ But I also think that, just as it is necessary to show that the institutions men-

14. *Ibid.*, p. 267. 15. Italic in text. 16. Italics in text.

17. *The State in Capitalist Society*, pp. 183 ff.

tioned earlier are part of a system of power, and that they are, as Poulantzas says, increasingly linked to and buttressed by the state, so is it important not to blur the fact that they are not, in bourgeois democracies, part of the state but of the political system. These institutions are increasingly subject to a process of 'statization'; and, as I also note in the book, that process is likely to be enhanced by the fact that the state must, in the conditions of permanent crisis of advanced capitalism, assume ever greater responsibility for political indoctrination and mystification. But to suggest that the relevant institutions are actually part of the state system does not seem to me to accord with reality, and tends to obscure the disfence in this respect between these political systems and systems where ideological institutions are indeed part of a state monopolistic system of power. In the former systems, ideological institutions do retain a very high degree of autonomy; and are therefore the better able to conceal the degree to which they do belong to the system of power of capitalist society. The way to show that they do, is not to claim that they are part of the state system, but to show how they do perform their ideological functions outside it; and this is what I have tried to do.

Finally, Poulantzas notes that my book says very little by way of 'political conclusions'. If by 'political conclusions' is meant 'where do we go from here?' and 'how?', the point is well taken. I have no difficulties in suggesting that the aim of socialists is to create an 'authentically democratic social order, a truly free society of self-governing men and women, in which, in Marx's phrase, the state will be converted "from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it"'.¹⁸ But this obviously raises very large and complex questions which I did not believe it possible to tackle, let alone answer with any kind of rigour, at the tail-end of this particular book.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 277.